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SUBJECT: RUSSIA'S DUMA PASSES CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENTS
INCREASING TERMS

REF: MOSCOW 3265

¶1. (SBU) Summary: On November 21, the Russian State Duma passed constitutional amendments proposed by President Medvedev increasing the term of Russia's next president from four to six years, and the terms of State Duma members from four to five years. The proposed amendments must now go to the assembly's upper house, the Federation Council, where three-fourths of its members must vote in favor, after which two-thirds of Russia's regional assemblies must vote in favor before the amendments can become law. Russian media reports that this could not take more than a month and the constitution should be amended by the end of this year. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) On November 21, Russia's lower house, the State Duma, passed on its third and final reading constitutional amendments proposed by President Medvedev increasing the term of Russia's next president from four to six years, and the terms of State Duma members from four to five years. The vote was 392 in favor and 57 (the Communist Party faction) opposed. Earlier votes on the amendments' first reading on November 14 (388-58) and second reading on November 19 (351-57) were similarly lopsided. The proposed amendments must now go to the assembly's upper house, the Federation Council, where three-fourths of its members must vote in favor, after which two-thirds of Russia's regional assemblies must vote in favor before the amendments can become law. The next scheduled meeting of the Federation Council will be on November 26.

¶3. (SBU) Critics have been surprised not with the result, but rather the speed with which Medvedev and Putin accomplished it. Some have noted that there was no serious debate within the Duma on the proposed changes. Although such changes had been considered over a year ago, Medvedev did not campaign on them in the March 2008 presidential elections. Communist Party Duma member Nikolay Ryabov has belatedly argued that such changes should be the subject of a referendum, but Duma Legal Committee head and United Russia deputy Vladimir Pligin said that according to the current constitution, a referendum is not required. While many believe that the reason the changes were railroaded through quickly (the next scheduled elections are not until October 2011) was fear that a prolonged economic crisis would cost the government public support for the changes, opinion remains divided over whether Medvedev will be set up as a fall guy if the economic situation gets worse.

¶4. (SBU) Despite the overwhelming votes in support and the results of a recent poll by the All Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VTsIOM) showing that 56 percent of Russians supported Medvedev's initiative to extend the president's and parliamentarian's terms in office, there are still some dissenting views. Members of the Yabloko Party have continued their small protest outside the entrance to the Duma. Sergey Filatov, head of Kremlin administration under President Yeltsin, called the amendments yet "another way to

maintain the current government in power." Political analyst Dmitriy Furman from the Europe Institute tried to shift emphasis away from the actual term extension to discussion of the "behind-the-scenes" processes through which Russia is governed and the lack of any connection between the government and the Russian people.

¶ 15. (SBU) Another of Medvedev's proposals, an amendment to the Law on the Government requiring the government to report annually to the Duma, passed the lower house in a unanimous third reading on November 21, but this change will probably not be discussed until after regional parliaments approve the constitutional amendments increasing the terms of the president and Duma members.

BEYRLE